Together in death

A man and woman lie face down with a child between them in Jonestown, Guayana, Monday following a mass suicide late last Saturday. At least 775 bodies have been found, a figure much higher than the toll earlier estimated. See story on page A-1. (AP Laserphoto)

Dover AFB strains to process victims

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DOVER AIR FORCE BASE, Del. (AP) — The startling recount of the suicide-murder victims in Guyana will prolong the grisly, tedious process of identifying and embalming the dead, but Defense Departmnent Officials said Friday that they can handle it here.

"We're beginning to feel the pinch at this time," said Army Maj. Brigham Shuler, shortly after the toll of 408 victims was revised to at least 775.

He said the base would lease three additional refrigerated trucks to house the additional bodies. Five of the trucks, each able to hold 100 corpses in body bags, had been rented earlier for the clean up operation.

By Friday afteroon, 270 bodies were in Dover with more on the way aboard C141 cargo jets. The fifth planeload was due at 7:25 p.m. with 81 more bodies and the sixth at 8:50 with 70 corpses.

Officials had no estimate of when more planeloads of bodies would arrive nor of when the grisly ferrying operation would be completed.

Meanwhile, two C141s were loaded with aluminum caskets which had carried the first victims brought here and were later cleaned, steamed and disinfected for reuse in Guyana. The bodies in the aluminum boxes also were enclosed in plastic pouches.

Only the body of the Rev. Jim Jones, leader of the Peoples Temple cult in Jonestown, Guyana, was positively identified here. None have been embalmed, Shuler said, because identification was the top priority.

"This is a very tedious process," Shuler said, because most of the bodies have "zero in identification" evidence.

Officals in Guyana tentatively identified 174 of the bodies, but Shuler said only 20 of those bodies arrived on the first three C141s. He said identification experts were working on those bodies first.

The FBI was sending eight more fingerprint experts here to boost its 10-person team because of the additional bodies.

Shuler estimated that it could take three weeks to finish preparing the bodies for burial, but he said that estimate could be revised later.

Shuler said he had seen some of the bodies, but he would not describe them.

One officer said privately that the bodies "had maggots all over them," and that limbs had fallen off some. "I've been through two wars," he said, "and this is the worst I've ever seen."

Jones reportedly ordered his followers to drink a mixture of juice and cyanide Saturday night after Rep. Leo Ryan, D-Calif., and four others were killed in an ambush near the camp.

The bodies of Jones' followers have been rotting there ever since. The ones here had been in the damp tropical weather for at least four days and some longer.

Shuler said 182 of the victims were children under 15 years. Some of them were among those not counted originally because they were hidden under the bodies of adults.

There is no necessity for autopsies on the bodies because the cause of death was apparent, the operation spokesman said. He said there was no other legal reason for autopsies in the incident.